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DEMOGRAPHIC CONCERNS IN BELLES-LETTRES: INSIGHTS FROM THE WRITINGS OF GÜNTER GRASS AND MARGARET ATWOOD

by

Karol J Krótki

and

Guy C Germain

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Department of Sociology
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

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University of Alberta

Family matters

> In our museum - we always go there on Sundays-
> they have opened a new department.
> Our aborted children, pale, serious embryos,
> sit there in plain glass jars
> and worry about their parents' future.
>
> Günter Grass
> -from *In the egg and other poems*

When a social reality becomes first perceived by a sizeable proportion of that society's population (to the extent that this ever occurs), a question which naturally arises is whether this observation is initially confirmed by the statistics of the scientist and then spread via subsequent popular artistic forms, or whether the fact at hand is introduced by artists through their work and diffused throughout the society to be subsequently supported by the statistician. The query, then, is whether the artist, more specifically for our purposes, the writer, has ultimate insights into the functionings of society; whether, as Shelly believed, the poet could be encomiastically called a lawgiver for humanity (Milosz 1983: 203). Determination of this causal route is not really important for our presentation. All that is asserted here is that artists, at times, do have insights which scientists lack. It is not, therefore, inappropriate to look at any socially relevant question through the eyes of artists, poets, writers. Shakespeare made a claim, through Hamlet, immodest to hard-nosed scientists: "Me thinks, I see...Where? in my mind's eye" (*Hamlet*, I, ii, 188 ff). Mickiewicz (1952), Poland's national poet, some years before entering the messianic period of his creativity, used these words from Shakespeare as a motto when he wrote about the superiority of feeling and that of the heart, over the scientist's eye and microscope.[2] In W H Auden's translation:

Shouts a man with a learned air,
"My eye and my lenses
know there is nothing there.
"Ghosts are a myth
of ale-wife and blacksmith.
"Clodhoppers! This is treason
Against King Reason!"
...
Faith and love are more discerning
than lenses and learning.

(Cited by Milosz 1983: 211-213 after Auden in Mills 1956.)

In this paper, two novels substantively and a few others referentially are exposed to demographic analysis. The question considered is to what extent these two novels, one by Günter Grass and the other by Margaret Atwood, recognize population decline as a veritable social concern and dire social ill in need of redress. The kind and form of references to this 'social reality' will be examined, along with the differences between the male and female vantage points.

Headbirths: Günter Grass and the yes-to-baby no-to-baby quandary

Günter Grass, in his *Headbirths or the Germans are dying out* (1982) (the English translation of *Kopfgeburten oder die Deutschen sterben aus* (1980)), very clearly confronts his audience with the concrete facts of population decline in post-war Germany. Part verbal travelogue, part autobiography, the regrettable demographic given of the gradual extinction of the German population is confronted, debated, and analyzed through the eyes of the novel's two protagonists - Harm and Dorte Peters. As they travel throughout Asia visiting atypical tourist sites (the slums and cesspools of the third world) with the assistance of the Sisyphus Travel Agency, Harm and Dorte ceaselessly debate the question of whether or not they are to have a child. The account of their travels alternates between a retrospective and present tense observational perspective. The tale is, in reality, narrated from the author's viewpoint, as he plans how to create a film (or wonders even whether he should create one) capable of capturing the plight of Harm and Dorte. At tale's end the question of parenthood remains unresolved, deferred -another procrastinating excuse- until after the West German 1980 federal elections.

The term itself, 'headbirth', though probably still obscure in the western cognitive schema, is one which every social scientist would do well to acquaint him/herself with; the more so because it is aptly descriptive of the current state of the birth motive in those developed countries experiencing fertility below replacement.

The concept of 'headbirth', if Grass is to be interpreted literally, involves the birth of a child only in symbolic form. Conception and eventual delivery occurs cerebrally, and not embryonically. If the reader is left with any doubt or confusion as to the form of this mental conception, it is clearly illustrated by Grass on the jacket of the original German edition. Two pictures of a head appear (of which the gender is unclear - does it matter?), side by side, one with an enlarged egg (womb?) emanating from the forehead, the other with the egg replaced by a baby curled upside down in fetal position, still firmly attached to the forehead by the umbilical cord. This then, in its starkest form, is a headbirth, and Grass's entire novel is built around it. Harm and Dorte Peters, by story's end, become masters of mental parturition. More significantly, they become masters with equal proficiency. No longer does there exist a solely female ability in the area of human physiology. In musing on the title of his work, Grass narrates: "The title of the film or book or both might be ***Headbirths***, harking back to the god Zeus, from whose head the goddess Athene was born: a paradox that has impregnated male minds to this day"(5).

The image of Harm and Dorte is one of a couple living in the Western industrial world (the country happens to be Germany, but is unimportant) endowed with a clear and rational thought process, along with an above average grasp of demographic facts: "'What sort of future are *you* going to let a child loose in? What prospects will it have? Anyway, there are enough children already, too many. In India, Mexico, Egypt, China. Look at the statistics'"(9). If the implication here is that objective responsibility is the reason couples are choosing to forgo childbearing, then we think that this is a mistaken notion. Dorte's comments in this regard appear to be closer to reality, and more along the lines of demographers such as Becker[3]: "'All right. Of course convenience has something to do with it. But not only for me. Your way of life doesn't allow for a child, either. Your independence. Your love of travel and all that. I mean, once we've got the child...'"(23). The first

theme evident in Grass's work, therefore, is that of the headbirth as replacing biological birth. Harm and Dorte never do resolve their agonizing decision over whether or not to have a child, to finally give up their 'yes-to-baby no-to-baby' mentality.

Although a second line of thought developed by the author, that of hypothetical demographic reversal, is less prevalent in the novel, it is no less stimulating. Grass speculates on what would occur if the German and Chinese demographic situations were to be reversed. What if, says the author, there were a billion Germans and only eighty million Chinese.[4] Grass contemplates what life, indeed, what the world would be like in such a case. Would Germany, he muses, "...look to the Chinese for salvation? Would the other nations of the earth find things lacked salt? Would a world without us have any meaning or savor?"(5). Sadly, Grass never answers his question. Instead, he resigns himself to fatalism by suggesting that the decline in the German birth rate, and the eventual extinction of German nationals, need not be regrettable. After asking if such a thought (a society dying out) is permissible, he queries if there isn't "...a certain grandeur in stepping out of history, in forgoing progeny, turning into a mere object of study for younger nations?"(5). And besides, states Grass, "Would that be so bad? Think of all the great culture-bearing nations that can be admired only in museums today! The Hittites, the Sumerians, the Aztecs!...And mightn't the German language become, as the Latin of the Romans has today, a dead language, though still quotable?"(42). This is certainly a prime example of what Hollington, in his review, called Grass's renunciation of "an enlightenment faith in progress"(179). Like the myth of Sisyphus, a greedy king doomed forever in Tartarus to roll uphill a boulder which always rolled down again, Grass never attains a solution to the problem of the dying out of the Germans; he is doomed never to resolve the issue, and its root problem, the 'yes-to-baby no-to-baby' dilemma.

Along with a concern over sub-replacement fertility and its attendant consequence, extinction, the converse of this, rapid population growth in the less developed world, is also of vital interest to Grass. The author's dire warnings of massive shifts in population due to overcrowding is not lost on the reader: "'In the course of the eighties...'", Harm prognosticates to Dorte, "'...Asia will discharge its demographic pressure and flood the European continent. I see them by the thousands, by the

hundreds of thousands, silently trickling in, and here, yes, here in Itzehoe, in our very midst...'"(126).[5] A parallel here is evident with the French writer Jean Raspail's *Camp of the saints* (1973), a vividly portrayed account of a mass population exodus from the third to the first worlds.

Günter Grass has delivered a highly entertaining and readable novel. The pages are replete with demographic references and concerns, from below replacement fertility to overcrowding and population explosions in the third world, from one couple's obsessive preoccupation with the decision to have a child to musings on what might possibly result from a massive reversal in the numbers of Germans and Chinese. In the final analysis, however, we must stand in fundamental agreement with Paul Demeny (1982), a demographer of renown, who states in his review that "It would be a pleasure to report that superior style translates to superior insight; that the artist's pen cuts deeper than the tools of the demographer and the sociologist. Alas, this is not the case, at least not by the evidence of *Headbirths*" (1982: 411). However, the focus of the novel on the protagonists' inability to make up their minds is probably an insightful rendition of modern couples in the developed world: they find dozens of reasons why not to have a child "just now", until the female partner runs out of time altogether. Günter Grass has demonstrated that he is aware of the problem of the dying out of the German people, but offers no prescriptions to alleviate the problem and reverse the decline. Almost fifty years after Auschwitz, Grass's version of the 'final solution' for the German people is one of resignation: he chooses in the literary sense, to allow his countrymen to die out.[6] In this case, the artist has shown some insight, even if merely of descriptive, and not of remedial nature.

Handmaids and Hobgoblins

The handmaid's tale (1985) is perhaps Atwood's greatest literary triumph. Atwood, in her brilliantly recreated vision of our present technocratic society, has written a novel much different in scope and emphasis from Grass's work. Her haunting version of the future is stark and bleak, and richly provocative in its entirety.

Set in the Republic of Gilead in post 1990's North America, Atwood's richly woven narrative concerns a short time span in the life of a handmaid named Offred (named, as all handmaids are, by juxtaposing the preposition and the name of the Commander to whom the handmaid has been

entrusted), enlisted to bear children for the elite. Life in this theocracy transpires under a suffocating shroud of sexual, emotional, and intellectual repression, where the Bible has become the constitution, and religious zealots its judiciary.

The handmaid's tale turns out to be, on a number of fronts, more satisfying than Grass's *Headbirths*. Because its message is much more subtle and because its prose is more poetic and flows more smoothly, Atwood succeeds where Grass fails. Jasipovici (1982), in his review of *Headbirths*, wrote that "It is the writer's function to ask us to consider alternative realities, not so that we may lose ourselves in them, but so that we may recognize important facts about the reality we have..."(455). The irony in this instance is that it is really Atwood, as opposed to Grass, who does a much better job of this. Grass presents the reader with current demographic fact and little speculation about the future. Atwood, in her novel, demonstrates her more complete mastery of the genre by presenting a possible future demographic scenario with a great deal of speculation as to the attendant consequences for gender roles and interaction.

Atwood's tale is clearly Orwellian in style and content, as the parallels between life in Gilead and life under Big Brother are too numerous to miss. Offred and Winston Smith are true soul mates. Fertile females in Gilead have become handmaids for the elites, desired only for their reproductive capabilities. At the same time as females are seen holding this power (for Atwood makes numerous references to the effect that reproductive ability clearly brings with it great potency and influence), the handmaids are denied basic human freedoms: reading, writing, talking, playing "Scrabble". A major theme in the novel is this dichotomy between the two kinds of freedoms which women are given:

> Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles. There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it.(24)

Thus, the conflict between the sexes which results in Atwood's future world brings with it a rationalization on the part of males - the new freedoms which women are given justifies the loss of old ones. Atwood demonstrates her mastery of irony when she has Offred relate that "Women were

not protected then"(23).

The role of pregnancy and the value of children is commented upon by the author; it is not a pretty picture. This is Offred's, and the other handmaids', view of what a pregnant compatriot means to them: "She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved"(25). Ironically, salvation can now only come through childbirth. Even in such a society, then, pregnancy is still valued, but for a vastly different reason. Atwood has used the juxtaposition of fertility (life) and death to portray the value (and disvalue) of children. In Gilead, it is dangerous for a pregnant woman to go 'out' because "Now that she's the carrier of life, she is closer to death, and needs special security...All children are wanted now, but not by everyone"(26). In our current feverish debates over the abortion issue, has anything really changed at all? Life and death is juxtaposed again: "Here and there are worms, evidence of the fertility of the soil, caught by the sun, half dead..."(17).

Atwood's objective is to rail against the patriarchal attitudes of today, which, if we are not careful, will lead to increased patriarchy in the future. This is a decidedly feminist novel, and no one can miss the references throughout to the worst case scenario envisaged by Atwood: "We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans...We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices"(128).

In terms of strictly demographic concerns raised, the novel is replete with references to falling birth rates in the Western developed world. Perhaps the single most important theme in ***The handmaid's tale*** is that there exists a danger to society from the rapid emergence and diffusion of twentieth century radical feminism. Atwood clearly identifies feminism, at least in its developed version, as being the primary cause of the dying out of humanity, and sees the future in terms of new social institutions arising at the cost of defeating feminist attitudes. In at least four places in the text, reference is made to feminist attitudes as being responsible for below replacement fertility rates (pages 107, 152, 198, 206). Some of the themes discussed in this context include a) that women were lazy and simply did not wish to reproduce, b) that the value of women rested primarily with their reproductive capabilities, c) that the sexual act became too easy to obtain for men, and consequently,

was 'turning men off sex and marriage', and d) that females were relinquishing the role of motherhood, for which they were receiving no respect, since money was the only measure of worth. In addition to these references, comments made in the historical appendix, which reads as a post-Gileadean anthropological and sociological discourse, indicate that future social scientists will cite the high prevalence of contraceptive techniques and voluntary and involuntary sterility as the causative factors in the birth rate decline.[7]

The corollary of this concern with the fertility decline is that Atwood indicates that this would have been (is) a temporary phenomenon (theoretical similarities with Easterlin[8] and others?): "Those years were just an anomal historically speaking, the Commander said. Just a fluke. All we've done is return things to Nature's norm"(206). Atwood has fulfilled her role as a writer by presenting the reader with an alternative reality. Whether this alternative is a plausible one, however, is a different matter. At least two reviewers (and doubtless many others) have, in effect, stated that a scenario which Atwood describes could never occur: Flower (1986) and Slonczewski (1986). Regardless, Atwood has demonstrated her comprehension of the trend in declining birth rates and has postulated a future in which population decline leads to female subjugation.

The message which emerges from both Grass's and Atwood's works is that history is forever propelling us forward. As Hollington wrote, "...***Headbirths*** is quite emphatic in asserting that nothing in history ever comes to a final halt, or makes an absolutely fresh start"(179). Atwood, via the voice of Professor Piexoto, says much the same thing: "As we know from the study of history, no new system can impose itself upon a previous one without incorporating many of the developments to be found in the latter..."(287). The message seems to be that we must learn from our erroneous ways now, if historicism is not to exact its inevitable toll. In our demographic analysis, no profound findings of a general nature become available, which would be suitable for the development and formulation of population policies for developed societies. The male stand despairs of practical measures capable of reversing the process and sees no hope for the developed societies. Atwood's perspective views feminist attitudes as the reason for the decline, and what she believes would be the logical conclusion to such attitudes is proposed. It is close to ironic that a feminist writer, almost

standard bearer feminist, would find a logical demographic solution in the abolition of feminism. Atwood doesn't propose to step out of history, as Grass resigns himself to do, but she is equally pessimistic, at least from the perspective of feminism. What these two writers have told us is that we are caught in a double bind; we can no more sit back and allow our current demographic situation to exist than we can attempt to search for practical solutions to the problem. It is heartening that writers like Atwood and Grass are beginning to take notice of our collective demographic plight, but less so that they offer little hope for an escape from it.

ENDNOTES

1. We are grateful for advice received from Bogdan Czaykowski of the University of British Columbia and Juliet McMaster of the University of Alberta.

2. Mickiewicz misquotes Skakespeare by saying "...mind's eyes" (1952: 23), poetically a possibly less powerful vision than the correct "...mind's eye".

3. Gary Becker(1960) argued that children could be treated as consumer durables, and posited that the utility of children was a function of personal taste, the quality of children desired, availability of income, cost, and supply. In reply, Judith Blake (1968) argued against Becker's notion that the economic theory of demand for consumer durables could be applied to the analysis of reproductive motivation.

4. The combined mid-1989 population estimate of the two Germanys was 78.1 million (Population Reference Bureau, 1989). The most recent UN estimate is for 1986 and adds up to 77.7 million (the gain by 1989 is due to immigration by German ethnics from lands east and south). Since the German fertility decline started in the thirties, it never returned to replacement level - not even during Hitler's most intensive, pro-natalist policy. Consequently, since 1975, Western Germany, and since 1970, Eastern Germany, show population declines in absolute numbers (United Nations Demographic Yearbook, 1986: table 3, and earlier editions for 1980 and 1975). The current (late 1989) massive exodus from Eastern to Western Germany does not affect the joint decline. It is merely a movement within both Germanys. Grass's awareness of the "dying out" of the Germans is based on data!

5. Writing a few years earlier, in an essay entitled, "Racing with the utopias", Grass (1985: 56) echoed similar sentiments: "Sick of freedom from work, disgusted with idleness and their daily ration of Meki Food, no longer willing to carry their oversized heads on frail bodies, the masses escape from the cities. In hordes they move out to the country and amuse themselves looking for a past utopia."

6. A participant in the colloquium made the point during the discussion after the presentation of the paper that it is a complete misuse of words to call the Nazi treatment of Jews and the Grass vision of German demography by the same expression "final solution". This goes without saying in some formal sense. More deeply, it takes an artist to juxtapose these two phenomena. It is startling to think that a society that dealt in "final solutions" is now exposed to one itself.

7. At a learned society's conference one of us speculated why fertility levels in Canada are as low as they are, and lower still in Quebec. Having found no explanation among the usual and obvious variables, he fell back on feminism (Krótki 1989). His female listeners accused him of slovenly reasoning and incomplete analysis.

8. Richard Easterlin(1980) wrote a popular book in which he asserted that "baby boom" generations tend to be associated with adverse economic fortunes and a consequent decline in fertility. Part of his argument was that the present fertility decline facing the industrialized world is a temporary phenomenon.

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